

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 16, 2009

Honorable Pete Geren
Office of the Secretary
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Secretary Geren,

We write in response to welcome reports that the Army is considering ending a policy that requires a commanding officer to be notified when a soldier voluntarily seeks counseling. The news that you are considering changing your policies to boost confidentiality and increase access to care for soldiers in need of counseling or other mental health care is very welcome and we urge you to enact this change swiftly so that soldiers will have one less obstacle to face in getting help.

Last year, as you know, the RAND Corporation in its *Invisible Wounds of War* report, estimated that approximately 300,000 individuals who have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq up to that point were currently suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or major depression. The report also noted continuing gaps in service for soldiers between the need for care and the ability to receive adequate care. This was only the latest in a series of reports citing the PTSD crisis facing our military services.

Both the RAND Report and other reports, including the July 2007 report by the Defense Department's Mental Health Task Force, have highlighted many obstacles facing soldiers with PTSD or otherwise in need of health care. Time and time again though, stigma emerged as a significant if not the major barrier, in all of these reports.

In speaking of the need to address stigma, the RAND Report stated, "information about being in treatment is currently available to command staff although treatment itself is not a sign of dysfunction or poor job performance and may not have any relationship to deployment eligibility. Providing an option for confidential treatment has the potential to increase total-force readiness by encouraging individuals to seek needed health care before problems accrue to a critical level." We could not agree more.

We believe it is unacceptable and irresponsible not to act when it has been repeatedly been pointed out that soldiers in need of services are not seeking that care because of concerns about the impact on their careers or being seen as weak by their commanders or peers.

We know that the Army is aware of the struggles facing its soldiers suffering from PTSD and that it has taken numerous actions to meet the mental health needs of our soldiers

including hiring more behavioral health providers and identifying and funding more programs and policy changes to help our nation's soldiers.

We believe that by implementing this change, the Army will take a big step forward to reducing stigma and the perceived negative repercussions that soldiers have associated with seeking such services. We recognize that these changes may still require notification in some situations including when the counselor determines that the individual is a threat to him or herself or to others as is the case in mental health counseling available to the general civilian population. However, making it easier overall for soldiers to access high quality and more user friendly mental health services will benefit the soldier, their families, and our nation's military as a whole.

Until we combat the stigma associated with seeking treatment in all its different forms, the other laudable efforts that have been created, whether at Congress' direction or within the Defense Department itself, will likely fall short of fulfilling their potential.

We thank the Army for choosing to be a leader on this issue and urge you to enact this change to your confidentiality policies as soon as possible. We know that enacting this change is not a silver bullet that will magically help all soldiers impacted by PTSD, but we believe that every time you remove one more barrier, the closer we come as a nation to ensuring that no soldier gets left behind when it comes to getting the counseling and other services they need and have earned on the battlefield.

Sincerely,

Sam Moore

John Paul

Joe Sestak

Shelley Berkley

Mr. [Signature]

Ravi M. Brijalwa

Betsy Markey

Jim H. [Signature]

Donna F. Edwards

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